



**UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
REGION 8**

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July 18, 2005

Ref: EPR-N

Andy Cadenhead
Supervisory Forester
Medicine Bow - Route National Forest
925 Weiss Drive
Steamboat Springs, CO 80487

Re: Rock Creek Integrated Management - Draft EIS
CEQ # 20050210

Dear Mr. Cadenhead:

In accordance with our responsibilities under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Section 309 of the Clean Air Act, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region 8 (EPA) has reviewed the *Rock Creek Integrated Management Draft Environmental Impact Statement* (DEIS) primarily in the Medicine Bow - Route National Forest. With this project the US Forest Service (USFS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) propose to treat lodgepole pine to modify mountain pine beetle (MPB) activity, salvage beetle-killed trees, and change fuel characteristics on approximately 15,000 acres in a project area of approximately 70,000 to 75,000 acres. We understand that the Management Areas within the project area all include a timber management emphasis.

This is the first project requiring an environmental impact statement in USFS Region 2 that is being done under the Healthy Forest Restoration Act. In accordance with a provision in the Act, this project has chosen to limit the analysis to a single action alternative and a no action alternative. We offer the following comments and concerns which we look forward to resolving prior to the issuance of the Final EIS (FEIS).

Water Quality and Stream Health

The DEIS lists two streams (Little Rock Cr. and Gore Cr.) that appear on the Clean Water Act 303(d) monitoring list for sediment, and the DEIS lists one stream (Decker Cr.) having "diminished" stream health and another stream (W. Fork Toponas) "diminished to adequate" stream health. The DEIS lists a number of management actions among the reasons for the diminished conditions in these streams, including: grazing, timber harvest, road density, road crossing density and dispersed recreation. Under USFS and BLM mandates for stewardship and sustainability of resources, the Agencies should assure that their actions do not directly or

indirectly result in the listing of streams on the State's list of "impaired waters." Wherever possible, we recommend the land management agencies take action to reduce the likelihood of an adverse stream listing. In this case, the DEIS mentions several possible actions that could reduce that likelihood, including: moving road segments that are currently impacting streams, obliterating unnecessary roads and road crossings, managing dispersed campsites, and keeping management activities outside of buffer zones on these streams. Our review noted several instances where these actions are listed with qualifiers such as "if possible," "could be" and "where appropriate." Given the impacts of past management, the diminished condition of some streams, and the large scope of this project, EPA encourages the USFS to remove the qualifiers and add certainty that at least the most significant of these improvement actions will be incorporated into the project.

The DEIS indicates that one of the guiding criteria for managing roads in this project is a resulting "net benefit to the stream network." EPA strongly supports this goal, and if met, this would alleviate EPA's watershed concerns with the addition of over 25 miles of new road and temporary road associated with the proposed action. The DEIS suggests that to meet this goal, the project will have to improve existing roads to standard, and commit to implementing the listed watershed improvement projects. The Environmental Consequences analysis in the FEIS should specify whether the agencies have committed to actions associated with the project that would result in a "net benefit to the stream network."

It appears that the Environmental Consequences analysis of watershed resources in the DEIS assumes all these watershed improvement actions will take place. The DEIS states, "Under this [proposed] alternative, the watershed improvement projects would be implemented...". If it is possible that these actions will not be incorporated into the project (i.e. due to lack of funding or for other reasons), the Environmental Consequences analysis should be edited and reassessed in the FEIS under the assumption that these problem areas will not be improved.

We recommend including a map of water resources (primarily the named streams) to assist in understanding the project's potential to impact specific watersheds. Additionally, information on the acres of treatment, and change in road and road crossing density sorted by watershed would assist in understanding these impacts.

In summary, while EPA does not object to this project, we have concerns with the existing condition of the watersheds in the project area, and with this project's potential to worsen these conditions. We expect that our watershed concerns could be addressed in the FEIS. The DEIS states that some of the existing impacts to these watersheds stem from past timber management. We recommend that the FEIS include a discussion of whether this project (BMPs, treatment design, etc.) differs from the past projects in the project area that resulted in significant adverse watershed impacts. We are encouraging the lead agencies to include as much certainty as possible that watershed restoration actions will be included in the project to help mitigate for project-related impacts, beetle epidemic impacts, and impacts from past management.

Proposed Actions and Alternatives

The lead agencies have chosen to analyze a single action alternative for this project. We understand that the Healthy Forest Restoration Act allows this, but does not require agencies to limit the number of alternatives. Section 102 of the National Environmental Policy Act directs that all agencies, “to the fullest extent possible” shall include within a detailed statement by the responsible official, “alternatives to the proposed action.” The Council on Environmental Quality then clarified the meaning of a “range of alternatives” to include “all reasonable alternatives” in the list of “40 Most Asked Questions.” EPA has concerns regarding the potential decision-limiting effects of analyzing a single alternative that could limit opportunities to reduce impacts to environmental resources while meeting project goals. We plan to provide detail regarding these concerns to the Regional and State offices for consideration on future projects under the Healthy Forest Restoration Act. We recommend the FEIS include information on why analysis of a range of action alternatives was not possible or desirable in this case.

The DEIS includes a definition for “sanitation” treatments (p. 134) that differs from other USFS projects because in this case, sanitation includes green, uninfected trees that are “imminently susceptible” to beetle attack. We recommend the name of this proposed treatment type be changed in the FEIS to be consistent with other USFS vegetation projects. Perhaps something like “sanitation with preventive thinning treatment” would better describe this proposed treatment.

The DEIS makes the case that because the beetle epidemic is underway, the agencies cannot predict the extent to which specific treatments will be applied. We agree that this approach makes sense for prevention vs. sanitation vs. salvage because the treatment type will differ based on the status of beetles in the particular stand. The DEIS avoids projecting the acreage for all of the treatment types based on this rationale except to project a maximum acreage for the project as a whole (15,000 acres). It seems that some of the proposed treatments are more predictable. Where the agencies can be more specific regarding the project, we recommend the FEIS reflect that certainty. For example, prevention treatments designed to protect trees important for scenery or recreation might be more predictable, as might clearcuts designed to restore mistletoe infected stands. We believe it is good practice to include certainty, where possible, regarding both treatment acreage and resulting impacts. Where it is not possible to predict a specific acreage, it may still be possible to provide a minimum or maximum acreage, or a range within which various treatments are expected. This information helps readers, as well as internal and external reviewers, to understand the scope and impacts of the proposed project.

As acknowledged in the DEIS, the effectiveness of project actions is not certain regarding the ability to protect trees from beetles or from fire, particularly if the ongoing “epidemic” becomes a “pandemic” as it has in many places in Colorado. The project proposes to treat significant acreage, but that acreage is only a portion of the most vulnerable stands in the project area or the greater area surrounding the project, thus reducing the ability to alter the behavior of this epidemic. For this reason, the agencies should consider how to prioritize actions

over the five-year course of the project. It may be a good idea to focus actions first on areas most likely to have multiple benefits, and also on areas requiring specific, intense action to protect scenic trees such as in campgrounds. Perhaps the areas with highest priority for early management would have the following characteristics: Areas that would assist in fire management (i.e. pinch points); areas where fuels treatments would also reduce beetle susceptibility; and areas where treatments would reduce the likelihood for adverse watershed impacts. EPA specifically encourages the lead agencies to include actions critical to reducing risk for watershed impacts in the initial priorities (i.e. road relocation, road obliteration, dispersed camping management, culvert replacement, etc).

Miscellaneous

In the analysis of the affected environment for fire and fuels, the DEIS (p. 100) includes the following sentence, “In lodgepole pine [MPB] population outbreaks are often stand replacing events, as fire usually follows the outbreak within 15 years (Samman et al 2000).” Please note that Samman et al 2000 is a report to Congress, not a peer reviewed scientific document or study. The quote from Samman in the report to Congress is not referenced to any other document or study. We recommend the FEIS for this project either include (in place of Samman et al) the reference to the original source study, or remove this sentence.

EPA Rating

Based on the aggressive scope of the project treatments and new roads, along with the documentation of existing, significantly impacted watersheds and diminished stream health, and on uncertainty regarding proposed mitigation for watershed impacts EPA has issued a rating of **EC-2 (Environmental Concerns - Insufficient Information)**. The “EC” rating indicates that the EPA review has identified environmental impacts that should be avoided in order to fully protect the environment. Corrective measures may require changes to the preferred alternative, or application of mitigation measures or actions that can reduce these impacts. The “2” indicates that EPA has identified additional information, data, analyses or discussion should be included in the Final EIS. A full description of EPA’s EIS rating system is enclosed.

We appreciate the opportunity to participate in this project. If you have any questions or would like to discuss our comments, please contact me (303-312-6004) or Phil Strobel, EPA’s Lead Reviewer for this project (303-312-6704).

Sincerely,

Original signed by Deborah Lebow for

Larry Svoboda
Director, NEPA Program
Office of Ecosystems Protection
and Remediation

Enclosure

